"What On Earth Did They Think They Were Doing?" — Slavery and the White Mistresses in Valerie Martin's *Property*

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Abstract:

Taking as its main corpus Valerie Martin's neo-slave narrative, *Property*, this paper portrays a violent relationship based on racial domination between a white mistress, Manon Gaudet, and her black slave woman, Sarah. This work highlights the subversive aspect of *Property* in unsettling the conventional historical accounts which neglected white women's active involvement in the institution of slavery in the Antebellum South. Instead of looking at the American white mistresses as delicate upper-class women who are themselves victims of the white male patriarchy, this paper, instead, portrays them as violent perpetrators who engaged in subjugating and dehumanising the black subject.

Despite the overriding narrative voice of the white mistress, I argue that the novel does not stop short at portraying Sarah as a victim of slavery. It becomes a contrapuntal historical narrative which highlights the struggle of this slave woman to free herself from bondage through her transgressive modes to resist both racial and gender paradigms. In so doing, Sarah becomes a foregrounding voice who responds back to her white mistress who remains metaphorically and literally a bonded woman because she refuses to free herself from the slaveholding culture and thought.

Keywords: Resistance, domination, race, gender, freedom, slavery, property.

The writing of historical events is often a reductive and subjective reproduction, a process in which the historian resorts to some distortions and variations because "history is a verbal model of a set of events external to the minds of historians" (White 2001, 1721). In her grounding work on "historiographic metafiction," Linda Hutcheon observes that "unitary, closed, evolutionary narratives" of traditional historiography have given way to new pluralised counter-narratives which not only de-doxified the monoltithic discourses but also foregrounded the externalized abjects such as class, race, and gender (Hutcheon 1988, 66). In White Mythologies: Writing History and the West, Robert Young argues that "postmodernism is a self-conscious [discourse] about a culture's own historical relativity- which begins to explain why, as its critics complain, it also involves the loss of the sense of an absoluteness of any Western account of History" (Young 1990, 19). Relying on these subversive assumptions about history and identity, this paper focuses particularly on Valerie Martin's *Property*. I highlight the unsettling aspect of *Property* in deconstructing the conventional historical accounts which neglected white women's active involvement in the institution of slavery. In so doing, I reflect upon Manon Gaudet's racialized treatment of her black female slave as a form of master-slave relationship, which negates the humanity of the racial other. I demonstrate that,

despite the overriding narrative voice of the white mistress, the novel is an unsettling historical form, which excavates the silenced voice of the black female subject, Sarah, through her transgressive modes to resist both race and gender paradigms.

Property is narrated from the perspective of the first-person omniscient narrator, Manon Gaudet, the wife of the slave owner, who lives on southern Louisiana sugar plantation in 1828. It starts with the spyglass, an image that Michel Foucault calls, "the panoptican," an instrument of power to discipline and control the subject. Manon uses the spyglass to spy on her husband who uses it to spy on his slaves. "The Glass is on the landing, pointing out of the only window in the house that faces the quarter. He had it specially mounted for this purpose, to watch the negroes at their daily business, to see if they are congregating" (Martin 2003, 18). As an instrument of power, the spyglass is a self-reflexive image that conveys the controlling gaze of the white master. The opening scene starts with Manon who uses the spyglass to witness her husband's sexual abuse of the naked slave children:

> There were five of them. He gets them all gathered at the river's edge and they are nervous... First he reads to them from the bible...then they have to strip...One by one they must grasp the rope, swing over the water, and drop in.... He encourages them to shout and slap at one another once they are in the water. Then they have to come out and do it again, only this time they hang on the rope two at a time, which means one has to hold on to the other...Their little bodies displayed to him in various positions...The boys rub against each other..., and it isn't long before one comes out of the water with his member raised. That's what the game is for. (Martin 2003, 3-4)

The purpose of this homoerotic game is to prove that the slaves "are brute, and have not the power of reason" (Martin 2003, 4), a pretext so that "the servant's tumescence subsides as quickly as the master's rises, and the latter will last until he gets to the quarter. If he can find the boy's mother, and she's pretty, she will pay dearly for rearing an unnatural child" (4). Manon's depiction of her husband's sexual activity translates her passivity in a sense that she does not seem to react to the sexual subordination of the slaves, despite feeling disgusted by his perversion. Manon is not a bystander. She is a witness to her husband's sexual abuse of the black children, and her inaction makes her a participant in the dehumanization process of slavery. As a white Southern woman, she lacks empathy and imagination because she represents the mindset of her slave-holding society, wherein the discourse of property shapes the subject's moral order.

Manon's entrapment in the ideological context of her era is conveyed through a peculiar scene of mastery over her slave, following the death of her mother. Next to the room where her mother's body lies, Manon kneels in front of the breastfeeding Sarah, who has just finished nursing her child. She methodically begins to suck the milk from her slave:

> Sarah was sitting forward, her long hands folded in her lap, her eyes resting on the child. The drop of milk still clung to the dark flesh of her nipple...I dropped to my knees on the carpet before her and rested my hands upon her wrists. I could feel the smooth, round bones through the thin cloth of her

> sleeve. I leaned forward until my mouth was close to her breast, then put my tongue to capture the drop…I dissolved instantly, leaving only a trace of sweetness. I raised my hand cupping her breast, which was lighter than I would have thought. It seemed to slip away from my fingers, but I guided the nipple to my lips and sucked gently…How sweet… I closed my eyes, swallowing greedily…How wonderful I felt, how entirely free. My headache disappeared; my chest seemed to expand. (Martin 2003, 76)

Critics argue that this passage reflects a lesbian scene which translates Manon's love for Sarah. Joyce. C. Oates, for instance, contends that "wordless scenes between mistress and servant, tenderly and sensuously described by Manon, are surrogate for romantic, erotic expressions for both women" (Oates 2005, 134). She stresses that "Manon is unwittingly in love with her servant" (139) and that "most of her actions, even when she lashes out bitterly against Sarah, are guided by this thwarted passion" (139). Lesbianism, in fact, is a resistance to the male-dominated world that plagues and confines women's life. To use Amy King's words, "it allows women to assert their independence from the patriarchal social structure and take part in female community" (King 2010, 211). However, Manon's "erotic" scene with Sarah does not highlight lesbianism as a form of liberation from patriarchy. "The theory that triumphant female desire will overshadow the harms of male dominated society does not reflect the realities of societies that privilege ownership of people, as in the antebellum South" (King 2010, 211). Rather, the scene illustrates Manon's dehumanizing control of Sarah. In an "uncanny" way, it echoes the prototypical white male master's rape of the slave woman. Sexual abuse was a culturally accepted practice and an institutionalized right and rite of the white male dominating group in the Antebellum South. Rape was legitimized because black women were considered to be innately lustful beings and were valued for "irresponsible, covert sexual adventurism" (McD Beckles 2018, 74).

This hyper-sexualization made them the object of the white man's fantasy and a pretext to build and reinforce white man's own masculinity while simultaneously preserving the oppressive ideals of both white female purity and black deviance (Feinstein 2018, 33). "Long hands," "the dark flesh," "her nipple," "the smooth, round bones," "her breast," and "light" skin are all terms that prefigure Manon's perception of her slave. Her depiction is voyeuristic. Her focus is on the naked body of her slave. In sexually abusing and objectifying Sarah, Manon feels empowered and free. Her headache suddenly disappeared and her "chest expanded" (Martin 2003, 76). In sucking Sarah's nipple, Manon reiterates what her husband does and feels when he rapes his female slave. She feels pleasure savouring her slave's warm milk. "This is what he does," Manon explains in referring to her husband. "How thin it was, how sweet!" (76), she says. In sexually abusing Sarah, Manon, in a fashion reminiscent of her husband, controls and exercise power on her slave. She looked at Sarah and was satisfied by the fact that she looked scared. "She's afraid to look at me" (Martin 2003, 77), Manon thought. "She is right to be. If she looked at me, I would slap her" (77), she contends.

Manon's sexual abuse coincides with the death of her mother, a crucial moment of self-empowerment because Manon now owns another property, her inheritance. For Manon, ownership provides power and freedom, which further legitimises her control over the body of her slave.

"Mother's estate is left entirely to me and is greater than I thought," she says (Martin 2003, 83). "She had set aside a small inheritance I knew nothing about, and it has grown impressively. So I am to have the house, the furnishings, sufficient income to live comfortably, and two slaves, Peek and a boy named Isaiah whom mother had hired out to a baker in town. All this is mine" (83). Yet, this feeling of empowerment and independence in owning her mother's property is impeded in a phallogocentric culture because her "husband can, and doubtless will, dispose of it as soon as [she] can get it" (83).

Manon's awareness that her property will be taken from her conveys that oppression in *Property* is not only restricted to owning the black body. It also refers to another kind of subjugation; white women's confinement in the phallogocentric discourse. From Manon's first-person perspective, the husband has the power to own the property of his wife since, by marriage, the wife is a subordinate. Not only Manon's husband has a claim over her own inheritance, he is also sexually violent and a lustful perpetrator. He has two sons from his slave and concubine, Sarah. Not only is his adultery an issue, but also it is his lack of wit and tenderness that also matters. In Manon's words, "in his home he was tyrant. He drained the color from every scene, the flavor from every bit of food, the warmth from every exchange of sentiment. He has not so much destroyed my life as he emptied it" (Martin 2003, 153). Manon's husband "could talk about sugar, he was knowledgeable about wine and spirits, he liked to shoot animals, this was the range of his interests" (152). However, "art and music meant nothing to him; he could not concentrate on a picture long enough to see it" (152). As a victim of her husband's tyranny, Manon sees herself a prisoner in "the madhouse of his cupidity, perversion and lust" (89).

As a result of her subordination, Manon assumes that she can identify with Sarah since she thinks they both share the same gender oppression by the same perpetrator. She refuses to sell her because her husband would find another. She believes that Sarah suits her for she hates him as much as she does. Through gender identification, Manon naively fails to understand that her slave's oppression is of a different order. She, therefore, further hegemonizes Sarah's oppression within her gender narrative. This myth of gender identification between white mistresses and her black female slave is accounted for in a scene when Manon sarcastically recalls the "touching" departure with Sarah to see her dying mother: Her husband bids farewell to his wife and her servant, fearing that one of them will die of Cholera. Manon knows that he wishes her own death instead of Sarah's. As a white mistress, the idea that her husband prefers his black concubine to his own wife is a frustrating thing. As a result, she wishes that he "might be killed while shooting rebellious negroes" (Martin 2003, 63). However, Sarah "wishes them both dead" (63) because they both represent the discourse of her double subordination as a black female slave.

Sarah escapes after the murder of Manon's husband, following the black insurrection. Instead of celebrating her slave's escape, Manon angrily thinks that Sarah "took advantage of the confusion and of that event she must have longed for, her husband's death" (131-132). She equates the insurrection with "confusion" and Sarah's freedom with the foolish act of taking the advantage from the death of the master to vilify her slave. "My husband is dead," [Manon] thought. "Why should she run now, when she was safe from him? It didn't make sense" (Martin 2003, 23). Sarah's flight

makes perfect sense, for the slave understands something about her mistress that Manon does not know about herself: that the white woman is as much a part of the power structure of slavery as her husband (Ryan 2008, 179). Manon is maddened by the lies and hypocrisies that underlie patriarchal power, but she fails to comprehend that she is part of this system and depends upon the privileges it bestows- that she, too, is an oppressor (Ryan 2008, 179). As Fox Genovese puts it, "The hard truth is that slave and slave-holding women occupied antagonistic positions... [Slaveholding] women lived-and knew they lived- as privileged members of a ruling class" (Genovese 1988, 179). Overwhelmingly, "they supported slavery and its constraints as the necessary price for their own privileged position... [They] accepted and supported the social system that endowed them with power and privilege over black women" (Genovese 1988, 98, 145, 243).

History on the Antebellum South has often neglected white women's involvement in sustaining the institution of slavery, because it was predominantly written by men. In her poignant book, *They Were Her Property*, Stephanie. E. Jones-Rogers destroys the sentimental approach to white women's relationships with the slaves. Enslaving was not improper to "the delicate" white women. On the contrary, they invested in slavery. "Slavery with all its abuses, constituted the fabric of their beloved country-the wrap and woof of their social position, their personal relations, their very identity" (Genovese 1988, 334). Starting from an early age, they were given slaves as gifts. Owning human property thus became part of their socialization (Jones-Rogers 2019, 45). Manon Gaudet's father was a slave owner. He wrote treaties on the efficient ways his fellow planters should take to better manage and discipline their slaves. In Manon's words, "he was obsessed by his negroes" (Martin 2003, 182). He "was full of energy it seemed impossible that he would make no more distinguished account of his life than his list of business and domestic preoccupations" (Martin 2003, 87). Manon's father never allowed his slaves to work garden patches of their own because, as she recalls him saying, "it gave them a notion of independence and divided their loyalty, so that they might take more interest in their own patch than in the farm" (Martin 2003, 22).

Manon learns from her father an essential fact that the farm is the slaves' only "provider and protector" (Martin 2003, 22) and "the only place they come from and where they will be valued and cared for until they die" (22). As she recalls, she was never allowed to play with the negro children on the farm because, according to her father, it was "a perverse practice that resulted in a coarsening of the master's children and was the source of inappropriate expectation in the negroes, who must feel themselves the equals of their playmates" (22), a situation which, he believes, "could breed naught but contempt" (22). As a child, Manon internalized her father's racial divides and learnt to live by his dictates. She, subsequently, made of her dolls her only companions and understood that the only place destined to the negroes is the farm, a metaphor for slavery. Manon's mother, on the other hand, is even more invested in the institution of slavery than her own slaveowner husband. As an expert in this enterprise, she blames him for his failure to manage his plantation and rebukes his suicide as a final instance of what she would term, his management failure. The mother is more knowledgeable about the kind of plantation that brings more profit. She criticizes Manon's husband

for investing on sugar plantation because "there's no reliable profit in it "(Martin 2003, 68). Instead, she suggests the cotton plantation because it is "more practical" (68).

In *They were her Property*, Jones- Rogers goes even further as to chronicle white women's petitioning against the coverture law, which promulgates that married women's assets and property will be their husbands,' because they want to maintain and secure the property they have already owned even before marriage (Jones-Rogers 2019, 30). Property, in fact, helped them achieve their social and economic stability and sustainability. White women were, subsequently, against the Civil War because they were given more slaves than any other kind of property and were more invested in slavery than their own white men. The idea of liberating their human property became a problematic issue because slavery at that time was their sole mode of economic autonomy and freedom. Even after Abraham Lincoln's emancipation proclamation, which ended slavery, white women were often violent to preserve this institution and perpetrated "white terrorist acts" in order to secure the free labor they had. Manon exactly illustrates this category of women. She opposes the emancipation of her slave. She considers the abolitionist movement to be a Northern conspiracy against the South (Martin 2003, 99). As an active participant in the institution of slavery, she engaged in slave-hunting Sarah in order to be sent back to the segregating South.

Manon's failure to liberate Sarah is twofold. It disrupts her naive gender identification with her black slave and further grounds her in the anti-abolitionist sentiment of the Antebellum South. This failure is vehemently illustrated in their different strategies at dismantling their oppression. Manon refers to her voluntary failure to bear her husband's children. She consumes the sleeping tincture which makes her a "dead body" and sexually indifferent to the embrace of her husband (Martin 2003, 56). By rejecting her gender performativity, Manon thinks that she can transcend her phallogocentric definition as a natural body, a conception which legitimizes men's domination over women for being, on the other hand, associated with culture. As Monique Wittig points out:

> We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the idea of nature that has been established for us. Distorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call 'natural,' what is supposed to exist as such before oppression. Distorted to such an extent that in the end oppression seems to be a consequence of this 'nature' within ourselves (a nature which is only an idea) ...Woman is a myth... No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and enuch, which is described as feminine... The capacity to give birth (biology) is what defines a woman. (Wittig 2003, 2015)

Whereas Manon rejects sexual domination, Sarah resorts to other racialized means of resistance. Publicly she performs the stereotypical character of "the Sambo," a "docile [body] but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing" (Elkins 1971 82). Sarah's citational performativity makes her an object of suspicion. "She is poisoning me," Manon's husband says (5). Her black and "darting look" is disturbing because in Manon's words it is "a death

mask" (Martin 2003, 55). Sarah's role of the docile body and her blank looks constitute her private protective tactic, or what James C. Scott terms, "the hidden transcript," the underside of the "public transcript" wielded by the dominant over the subordinate (Scott 1990, 2). Public transcripts, Scott suggests, plot out "the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (2), that is, the rule for "hegemonic conduct" (xii). "Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that presents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (xii). Such critiques, Scott contends, are "expressed openly, albeit in disguised form," in "rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theatre of the powerless as vehicles for insinuation insubordination" (xiii).

Through her pretended subordination, Sarah, in fact, succeeds, although momentarily, to escape to New York. Her escape epitomizes Manon's stereotypical belief that "sometimes the dullest Negro is discovered to have a perfectly good wit when it serves his purpose" (Martin 2003, 145). As a transgressive black woman who can pass for a white, Sarah disguises into an aristocratic white gentleman, Mr. Maître, through the helpful mediation of Mr. Roget, her free black lover, and an unidentified white abolitionist couple who reside in New York. She had boarded the sailing vessel accompanied by a fake black servant named Midge who pretended Sarah's baby was her own. In passing for a white gentleman, Sarah performs what Judith Butler terms the role of the drag figure, which uncovers the illusion and fantasy of normative heterosexuality through its paraodic imitation (Butler 1990, 176). The drag imitates an imitation, the "myth of originality itself" (176), an imitation that mocks the notion of an original. As Esther Newton puts it: "At its most complex, [drag] says: 'my outside appearance is feminine, but my essence inside [the body] is masculine.' At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; 'my appearance outside [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence inside [myself] is feminine'" (Newton 1984, 103).

By passing for a white aristocratic man, Sarah not only subverts her white mistress's patriarchal perception of women, but also her dichotomized perception of race. She imperils both the essential binaries of race and gender by passing as white and as a man. Her passing narrative subverts the conventional perception of identity as a natural and biological given. In performing the role of a white gentleman, she proves that identity is a mere cultural construct and an instance of what Judith Butler terms, "a set of citational repetitions" dictated by traditional cultural norms. Through her manipulative strategies to escape bondage, Sarah becomes a figure of transgression who resists confinement within the ideologies of race by trying to reorder her world and reconstituting herself as empowered to act and to be a subject. She intervenes in the legal practices of dehumanization and reclassifies herself against the hegemonic ideology and structure of a slave culture. Despite her failure to escape, Sarah, nevertheless, develops a consciousness. She experienced freedom and the abolitionist atmosphere of the urban North. She becomes a changed person capable of responding back to her mistress, because in Manon's words, "she has traveled about the country as a free white man" and "has passed as a free woman, and that experience is generally deleterious to a Negro's character" (Martin 2003, 189).

At the end of the novel, Valerie Martin portrays a sharp contrast between the two women. Whereas Sarah comes back with an awareness of the possibility of freedom in New York, Manon remains a flat character whose future, as she puts it, was "dark" and small" (Martin 2003, 179). As a cultural construct of the Antebellum South, Manon remains obsessed with owning property. Now that her bankrupt husband died, she thinks that she can sell the plantation, pay his debts, and manage her life in sustaining her slaves. Instead of seeking to liberate herself from patriarchy, she chooses to perpetuate it, claiming for herself the patriarchal authority to which she was once subject by recapturing her escaped maid, even refusing a monetary offer from Mr. Roget that is "twice what Sarah was worth" (Martin 2003, 169). Manon had an ample opportunity to identify with her black slave's plague. When the black rebels chased her to the dark woods, she went through the black captives' experience of terror, loneliness, and helplessness when they are chased by the patrollers. In being tracked, Manon lost consciousness, but when she woke up, she was looking at a black hand (Martin 2003, 117). She moved her fingers and understood that the hand was hers (117). Reference to her black hand metaphorically symbolizes the interchangeability of the journey she experienced as a white captive.

Despite the horror of this journey, Manon has no empathy for her slave nor the will to liberate her. Instead of freeing herself from the institution of slavery and its horror, Manon herself engaged in slavecatching to hunt down Sarah who was sent back in a closed carriage. In so doing, Manon epitomizes those white women who were "economic actors, managers of slave-based household, and conduits in the process of socio-ideological transmission" (McD Beckles 2018, 68). In omitting the figure of the tyrant slaveowner husband, Valerie Martin supplies us with a female substitute slaveholder, who participates in the market economy as an autonomous agent to establish strategies based upon the ownership and possession of slaves. Manon envies Sarah for escaping unharmed, for she herself has been disfigured by the blow of one of the rebels and crippled by a gunshot wound as she flees into the nearby swamp and hides, significantly enough, coated with mud and unexpectedly accompanied by Sarah's wild child, who clings to her (Donaldson 2008, 276). What Manon cannot finally forgive Sarah for is the freedom her runaway slave has experienced, which is in sharp contrast to anything Manon herself felt. Nor can she forgive Sarah for that last revelation with which *Property* ends, where Sarah suddenly unveils what James Scott would call that hidden transcript, "the repository of refusal, rebellion, and indignation," (215) which Scott notes, "often takes the form of a public breaking of an established ritual of public subordination" (Scott 1990, 215).

What Sarah does is tell Manon what appeals to her about her time in the North: "They invites you to the dining room, and they asks you to sit at the table. Then they offer you a cup of tea, and they asks, "Does you want cream and sugar'"? (Martin 2003, 192). Manon is, in turn, dumfounded by the longest speech Sarah has ever made to her, because it is a speech that underscores Sarah's new openly voiced expectations to be treated not as a subordinate but as a subject in her own right, one who is acknowledged and whose sense of self is recognized and confirmed by those around her (Donaldson 2008, 280). In response, Manon regards Sarah's words in disbelief and judges that her uncle was right because "Sarah had changed; she had gone mad" (Martin 2003, 192). Her

statement implies that, as a product of the Antebellum South, Manon cannot imagine a society which sees a black slave worthy to sit at a table with white folk and drink tea. "What on earth did they think they were doing?" (Martin 2003, 193), Manon rhetorically contests in referring to the white abolitionist couple involved in Sarah's escape.

Valerie Martin's *Property* remains one of the most poignant neo-slave narratives written by a white woman author. In reflecting upon the master-slave relationship between a white mistress and her slave, Martin sheds light on the reductive historical accounts which omitted the involvement of the white women in consolidating the institution of slavery and implies that, in the end, owning human property does not only thwart the freedom of those who are enslaved, but also of those who enslave. Manon had the possibility to sever all ties with the confining past by reinventing herself anew and outside the racial and sexist paradigms of the slaveholding society. However, her inability to step outside the comfort zones of the Antebellum South makes her literally and symbolically a crippled character who can not transcend the conventional dictates of her era. It strikes me the ways Valerie Martin humanizes those who are dehumanized: She gives voice and agency to Sarah through transgressive actions and speeches, which not only unsettle the discourse of the slaveholding society, but also the very homogenizing voice of Manon, the first-person narrator who has long silenced her.

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